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"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES XE. NO. 32

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CASTE AND ITS FUTURE

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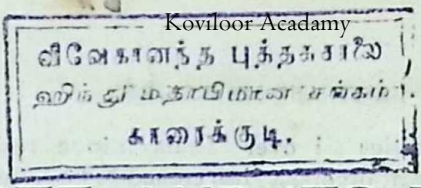

CASTE AND ITS FUTURE

Many of the evils from which the Hindu Society is suffering at present can be traced, directly or indirectly, to the prevailing caste system. The curse of untouchability is one of its extreme results. The non-Brahmin movement which is now looming large in different parts of India is an inevitable reaction against the age-long tyranny of the caste system. The solidarity within the caste, which, in ancient times, was the result of the community of culture, interests, occupation, customs and modes of life between the members of the same caste, no longer exists as no one now feels bound to follow any particular occupation or mode of life. Thus even within the Brahmin caste we find men of all degrees of culture from the highest to the lowest, and all occupations open to men. In Sind there are untouchable Brahmins! The Brahmins of Orissa sometimes come as sweepers to Calcutta; the Brahmins of South India are artisans, agriculturists, day-labourers, and this is more or less the case all over India. On the other hand, the non-Brahmins and even the so-called untouchables in many places have reached high standards of culture and education and sometimes follow the highest professions. The solidarity within the caste and a harmonious division of economic functions, which were the true strength of the ancient caste-system is completely gone, but the pride of caste remains and separates one caste from another as vehemently as ever. There is a story current about the North-Western Frontier of India that when a girl was being abducted by Pathans, the Brahmins of the locality looked at that event with complete unconcern as the victim was only the daughter of a Bania. The Hindus find no strong bond of unity or sympathy either within the caste or outside; the Hindu culture which was the ultimate force binding together the various

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castes and communities all over India into a real integral whole, a true unity in diversity, has ceased to be living; and as an inevitable result the Hindu society is crumbling down and has reached the lowest stage of disintegration.

Ghost of Its Former Self

Whatever might have been the meaning and utility of caste system in the past, it has now become the ghost of its former self and is doing incalculable harm to the society. Foreign critics who do not or cannot look at original truths and essential principles, readily point at the present artificial, meaningless, tyrannous caste system as a sufficient condemnation of Indian culture and civilisation. It is even put forward as a justification for the indefinite continuance of a strong foreign rule which would hold the different castes in balance in the interests of humanity. But apart from any use that the enemies of India may clearly make of this evil in our society, it is corrupting the whole system from within. It is the caste system of the Hindus that has made suitable marriage such a rare thing among them and by greatly restricting the choice of bridegrooms, has given rise to the inexorable and ruinous dowry system. By marrying within narrow limits for generations, the Hindus have become poor in blood and lost their vigour and vitality; and unless this vital defect is at once cured by the bringing of fresh blood through inter—marriage, the Hindus, who are already being described by scientists as "the dying race" may soon disappear from the face of the earth like other civilised peoples in the past.

A Question of Life and Death

Thus the abolition of the caste-system root and branch is verily a question of life and death to the Hindus; but as yet the movement in this direction does not seem to have gained much ground. Our reformers are only tinkering with the problem; they introduce inter-dining, open schools and temples to the

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untouchables, encourage marriages among sub-castes, but, as long as inter-marriage does not exist between different castes the caste-system cannot be said to have disappeared. It has been practically discarded in every other respect except in the matter of marriage. People take no account of caste until they come to marriage, when they keep strictly to the caste. They cannot disregard the caste as there is something in the brain that pricks, they think that it is bound up with their religion. They have a vague sense that losing one's caste amounts to losing one's *dharma*. The importance which the caste-system had in the life of the ancient Indians created this attachment and people are now blindly clinging to it, though it has completely lost its original meaning and purpose. This is the case also with other social and cultural institutions of the Hindus; the essence is lost, but the people desperately cling to the forms through the sheer force of habit and tradition. The Hindus must awaken to the true meaning of their religion and culture must become self-conscious; only then can the Hindu Society be freed from the dead weight of empty forms and blind prejudices. To make the Hindus self-conscious is the essence of Hindu Sangathan.

Varnashram Ideal

The Varnashram ideal has a great hold upon the minds of the Hindus, but they do not understand the true significance of that ideal and ignorantly confuse it with the prevailing caste-system. An intelligent study of the evolution of caste, however, ought to disillusion them in this respect. As a matter of fact, the caste-system may be said to be the reverse, the very negation of the ancient *Chaturvarna*. The division of society into well-defined classes is nothing uncommon and was not at all a peculiar feature of Indian life. It was the spiritual meaning and significance which the ancient Indians gave these social divisions that was peculiar to the genius of India and wielded such a powerful and lasting influence on the life of the Indian

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people. The broad four-fold classification of early human society into thinkers and priests, rulers and warriors, producers and traders, labourers and servants might have arisen naturally from the spontaneous development of social life and functions. But the Rishis or spiritual seers of India saw in this classification a deeper truth, the manifestation of the four attributes of the Divine in and through human society—Knowledge, Power, Harmony, Work. Thus the four orders are symbolically described in the *Purushasukta* of the Vedas as having sprung from the body of the creative Deity, from his head, arms, thighs and feet. They saw that the Divine was potentially there in every man, but the manifestation was not everywhere the same, and also saw that every man should be allowed to develop himself through work and discipline suitable to his own nature, *Swabhava*, to the degree and extent of the manifestation of the Divine in him, as only in this way could man proceed to the complete realisation of the Divine life on earth which was the ultimate goal, the *Purushartha*. This was the truth underlying the fourfold order, the *Chaturvarna* in ancient India. It was regarded as a symbol of the fourfold manifestation of the Divine in the human society, which had to be progressively realised and also as a practical device to indicate to people their true line of spiritual development through which they could best advance towards that divine goal. But whatever might have been the principle or the ideal, in actual practice it was not possible, at least for long, to divide people into classes according to their nature and capacity, their *guna* and assign to them functions, *Karma*, suitable to their inner development. Classification of men not according to their nature and capacity but according to birth came into vogue, and as the hold of the hereditary principle on the Indian mind was very strong, the four orders soon grew into a fixed social hierarchy. This was the real origin of the caste-system. But in ancient India this distinction of caste was not merely conventional as at present, but was made with a clear purpose. It was sought to develop well-defined

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types, and marriage within the same caste was intended to help that system. The Brahmins aimed at developing certain intellectual powers, to make their minds subtle for the consideration of higher things. The Kshattriyas sought to develop character which was all-important for the functions of that class. The Vaishyas cultivated a particular kind of intellectual power which would be of help to them in the matter of business. Even the Sudras had a certain social dignity and honour attached to their position and were expected to develop spiritually through faithful service of the higher classes. The great social ideals, created at this typal stage—the ideals of the true Brahmin, the true Kshattriya, the social honour and dignity of the Vaishya, and even of the Sudra—still remain impressed upon the minds of the Hindus, though that stage is long passed.

That fourfold distinction of ethical types could not be adhered to when there occurred mixture of races; the ideals remained more as a tradition in thought and on the lips than a reality of life. Classification in society came to serve the purpose no longer of developing ethical types, but merely of a division of economic functions and, with the increase in the complexity of the economic life of the people, led to the formation of numerous castes and sub-castes. Gradually this economic purpose also was lost and the economical divisions of functions became confounded beyond any possibility of rectification. The whole thing has now become meaningless; not to speak of the high spiritual and ethical purpose of the ancient *Chaturvarna*, it does not even serve the purpose of an economical organisation of society.

Evolution of Caste

"For, the typal stage" says Sri Aurobindo in *The Psychology of Social Development* "passes naturally into the conventional. The conventional stage of society is born when the external supports the outward expressions of the spirit or the idea become more important than the ideal itself. Thus in the

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evolution of caste, the outward supports of the ethical fourfold, —birth, economic function, religious ritual and sacrament, family custom—each began to exaggerate enormously its proportions and its importance in the original scheme. First, birth seems to have been of a minor or no importance in the social order, faculty and capacity prevailing; but afterwards the type fixed itself, its maintenance by education and tradition became necessary, and education and tradition naturally fixed themselves in a hereditary groove. Thus the son of a Brahmin came always to be looked upon conventionally as a Brahmin; and still more if both his birth and profession agreed with the hereditary convention which was becoming already more and more fixed. This rigidity once established, the maintenance of the ethical type passed from the first to a secondary or even a quite tertiary importance; from having been the very basis of the system it came to be a not indispensable crown or ornament, insisted upon indeed by the thinker and the ideal code-maker, but not by the actual rule of society. Once ceasing to be indispensable, it came inevitably to be dispensed with. Finally, even the economical basis began to disintegrate and birth and family custom along with remnants, deformations, new accretions of meaningless or fanciful religious sign or ritual, the very scarecrow and caricature of the old profound symbolism, became the riveting links of the system of caste in the iron age of the old society. In the full economical period of caste, the priest and the Pundit masquerade under the name of the Brahmin, the aristocrat and feudal baron under the name of the Kshatriya, the trader and money-getter under the name of the Vaishya, the half-fed labourer and economic serf under the name of the Sudra. When the economical basis also breaks down, then the unclean and diseased decrepitude of the old age has begun, it has become a name, a shell, a sham and must either be dissolved in the crucible of an individualist period of society or else fatally affect with weakness and falsehood the nation that clings to it."

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Sweep it Away

As we have already noted, the blind religious " Samskar " or prejudice of the Hindus acts against this sham of the caste system which is fatally affecting the society. Even our greatest reformers recoil before the prospect of making a frontal attack on caste. No more courageous man has appeared amongst the Hindu reformers in modern times than Swami Shraddhanand of revered memory. Even he had to say : " I realise the difficulty in remodelling the Hindu Samaj according to the ancient Varnadharma at once. But there should be no difficulty in all the sub-castes, and even non-castes consisting of the so-called untouchables being absorbed in the four principal castes." But we do not regard it possible that the Hindu Samaj can ever be remodelled again according to the ancient system of 'chaturvarna'—"there is some controversy whether it was ever anything more than an ideal or general norm more or less loosely followed in practice,"—or that the numerous castes can be brought back to the original four after all the confusions and complications that had arisen through centuries. No useful purpose will be served by allowing this decrepit system to continue in any form; however you may improve or modify it, the age-long habits of the people will very soon bring about the present confusion and degenerating condition. The remedy is to do away with the evil system in a sweep and build a new order of society on the basis of the permanent truth of human nature of which the ancient system of chaturvarna was only an application suitable to ancient time. That essential truth is that every one should be allowed perfect freedom and opportunity to develop himself according to his own inherent nature through works suitable to its development. It is obvious that the caste system enjoining a particular profession or mode of life on a person not according to his inborn nature and quality, but according to the accident of his birth is the very negation of this essential principle of human nature, this true *Sanatana dharma.* Our great scripture the Gita

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interpreted the ancient *chaturvarna* in its true sense and formulated its principle of the Swabhava and Swadharma, the principle that "all action must be determined from within because each man has in him something his own, some characteristic principle and inborn power of his nature; that is the efficient power of his spirit, that creates the dynamic form of his soul in nature and to express and perfect it by action, to make it effective in capacity and conduct and life is his work, his true Karma that points him to the right way of his inner and outer living and is the right starting point for his further development." (*Essays on the Gita* by Sri Aurobindo.)

Need of Revolution

No doubt, the abolition of caste will bring about a complete revolution in the social and cultural life of the Hindus, but it is such a revolution which is needed to renovate them and free them completely from the various evils that are eating into their vitals. When the binding becomes rotten the whole thing collapses at once. Some confusion is likely whenever any such change is brought about. But there should be some great idea behind these changes. The attempt to cut off India completely from her past and modernise her according to western ideas and ideals will be against the *swadharma* of the Indians and can do them no good. Also the deep-rooted religious prejudices of the Hindus cannot be removed merely by rationalistic arguments as to the present well-being of society; even if the mind understands, the heart will not accept and there will not be the moving vital force, the will that alone can bring about far-reaching revolutionary changes. The history of India shows that it is only a spiritual movement which readily appeals to them and can bring about a real re-awakening and regeneration. This is the consequence of the long spiritual culture and civilisation that has given a special bend to the Indian mind towards spirituality. The spiritual movement inaugurated by the great Buddha almost swept away the caste-system and struck at the

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root of many evils that had accumulated through a long period of Hindu decadence. But still the Brahminical tradition was too strong and the Buddhistic teaching of extreme asceticism and 'Nirvana' could not wield a lasting influence on the Indians who, from the ancient Vedic times, had essentially a synthetic mind that reconciled renunciation with enjoyment, spirituality with life in the world. It was on this account that Buddhism was finally thrown out of India and with the re-establishment of Hinduism, the old caste-system came back though greatly modified. Thus in Bengal when the caste-system was recovered after the Buddhistic deluge which had swept away all distinctions, only two castes could be formed, the Brahmins and the Sudras, as in South India we find the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Since that time there has been a series of recurrent attempts to abolish the caste-system and other cramping conventions; but "as the work of destructive intellectual criticism has never gone far enough and the constructive force has not been able to make a sufficiently wide and free space for its new formation" those attempts although productive of great changes never succeeded in getting rid of these conventions. Often they led only to the creation of further rigid division, new communities or new castes.

A Spiritual Movement—The Need

It seemed well-nigh impossible that the Hindus could ever shake off the caste system from within; a great onslaught from outside was needed. That has come with the period of European influence and intact which has done the preliminary work of weakening the caste-system and other meaningless conventions. But merely rationalistic movements to reform Hindu society taking reason as the sole guide or adopting western life as the ideal will not by themselves be able to bring any fundamental change in the life of the Hindus in general. We have only to see how the Brahmo movement in recent times failed to do anything tangible and has led to the forma-

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tion of a separate community which is still following the caste-system in disguise. To free the Hindu society completely from the obsession of caste and such other soul-killing conventions, what is needed is a comprehensive movement which will be spiritual not in the partial negative sense of Buddhism, not in the narrow sectarian sense of dogmatic religions, but will be inspired by the complete Indian ideal of the Vedas that made all life a preparation for spirituality and spirituality a power for the regeneration and uplift of worldly life, not its negation or renunciation, which will not only find out the essential truths of ancient Indian culture and religion and assimilate what is best and most essential in the various spiritual, religious, cultural currents that have entered into the life of the Indians from the outside, but will also bring to bear upon human life and human society truths and forces unknown and undiscovered. Mother India is waiting for such a great spiritual movement which alone can bring about a true re-awakening and regeneration of the Indian people and lead this ancient land of the Rishis to an unprecedented glory and greatness.

PONDICHERRY
Sri Aurobindo Ashram

ANIL BARAN ROY

SRI AURABINDO GHOSE
ON
UNTOUCHABILITY AND REFORM

An original truth-seeking thought, a strong and courageous intuition are required, but especially an unflinching spiritual and intellectual rectitude. We should recognise without any sophistical detail or hesitation those things in our creeds of life and social institutions which, apart from all phenomena of decline or deterioration, are in themselves mistaken, some indefensible, weakening to our national life or degrading and dishonouring to our civilisation. One need only instance the flagrant example of the treatment of our outcastes. There are those who would excuse it as an unavoidable circumstance of the past and even as the best possible solution then available; but the latter contention is highly disputable and an excuse is no justification. There are others who would justify it and, with whatever modifications, prolong it as necessary to our social synthesis. A solution which comdemns one-fifth of the nation to permanent ignominy is no solution; it is an acceptance of weakness and a constant wound to the social body and its spiritual, intellectual, moral and material well-being; a social synthesis which can only live by making a permanent rule of the degradation of our fellow-men stands condemned; the evil effects may be kept under and work only by the subtler, unobserved action of the law of Karma, but once the light of Truth is let in on these dark spots, to perpetuate them is to maintain a seed of disruption and ruin. Again, we have to look on other forms of our society and culture, to see where they have lost their ancient spirit or real significance, where they are now a fiction and no longer in accordance with the ideas they assume or with the fact of life, where, even if good in themselves or beneficent in their own time, they are no longer sufficient for our growth and have

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either to be discarded for better formulations or transformed. This will not always be in the direction of a return upon their old significance or the limited truth of a past ideal. For even on our past and present ideals we have to look with a clear insight and see whether they have not to be surpassed or enlarged or to be brought into consonance with new, wider ideals consistent with our spirit, so as to give place or fit into a greater future synthesis. Faith in ourselves and the spirit of our culture is the first requisite of a continued and vigorous life ; recognition of defect and of greater possibilities is the second, without which there cannot be a healthy and victorious survival.

One truth we can lay hold on as our best guide in our future effort, a truth seen very clearly by Vivekananda, that while the spirit and ideals of our civilisation were very good and the best part of them in their essence of eternal value and our internal and individual seeking of them earnest and powerful, at least in our leaders in thought and spirit and following, our application of them to the collective life of society was never sufficiently bold and thorough-going and became more and more limited and halting. This defect was not at all peculiar to India, but here the dissonance became specially marked as time went on and put on our society a growing stamp of weakness and failure. At first, there was a large effort at some kind of synthesis between the outer life and inner ideal ; but it ended in a static regulation of society, an underlying principle of spiritual idealism, of the maintenance of an elusive unity and fixed forms of mutuality, but with an increasing element of strict bondage, division, fissiparous complexity in the social mass, while the great Vedantic ideals of freedom, unity, the Godhead in man were left to the inner spiritual effort of individuals. Hence an insufficient power of expansion and assimilation which led the society, when powerful and aggressive forces broke in on it from outside, Islam, Europe, to be content only with a limited and a static self-preservation, a mere permission to live in however narrow a form of living, with however restricted an

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assertion of its spirit. Duration, survival was achieved, but not a really secure and vital duration,—for that is impossible without growth,—not a great, robust and victorious survival. But now survival itself is no longer possible without expansion; and what we have to do is to resume our greater interrupted endeavour and live out boldly and thoroughly in the individual and the society, in spiritual life, philosophy, religion, art, literature, thought, political, economic and social formulation, the full and great sense of our highest spirit and knowledge. When we do that, we shall find that all the best of what comes to us draped in occidental forms, is not only already implied in our own ancient knowledge, but has there a greater and profounder sense capable of suggesting nobler and more ideal formations. Only we need to live out thoroughly in life what we always knew in spirit. There lies the secret of the needed harmony between the essential meaning of our culture and the environmental requirements of our future.

(" *Is India Civilised* " *Arya, Vol. V, P. 429*).

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ACHARYA RAY

ON

THE HANDICAP OF CASTE

President Wilson in his *New Freedom* says that the greatness of the United States lies in the fact that any man belonging to any stratum of society can by his individual effort aspire to rise to the highest position in society.

Let me illustrate it by a tangible example. In Europe the cobblers and the shoe makers whom we class among the Chamars, may belong to any class in society. There profession is followed according to the taste and convenience of the man. Duke William of Normandy, the father of William the Conqueror took a fancy to a cobbler's daughter and married her and thus we see that William the Conqueror was begotton of a Chamar mother. Stalin, the successor of Lenin, at one time used to cobble shoes in order to earn an honest living.

But in our unfortunate Hindu Society, once a Chamar forever a Chamar. On his humble door is inscribed the words from Dante's In ferno—"All ye who enter here abandon hope." And yet some of our educated Hindus are never tired of waxing eloquent over Varnashram Dharma determined by birth. Why go to Europe and America? China is much nearer to our own country, and China owes her civilization in a small degree to her adoption of Buddhism from India. In China untouchability has been unknown for the last three thousand years and more. English and American writers are unanimous in maintaining that China is the only country in the world which is least caste-ridden, because in America and in England we have at any rate what we call Dollar worship. There are no 'Bhangis' in China, neither in Japan. Any one has liberty to take to any profession or trade according to his choice.